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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HARARE 000311

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TAGS: PREL PGOV ZI
SUBJECT: MUTAMBARA BACKS TSVANGIRAI FOR 2008

Classified By: Ambassador Christopher Dell under Section 1.4 b/d

Summary

¶1. (C) Arthur Mutambara, leader of the MDC's pro-Senate faction told the Ambassador April 10 that both MDC factions would work together in a coalition, fielding one candidate for president, and that anti-Senate faction leader Morgan Tsvangirai would be that candidate. Mutambara was confident

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the MDC could defeat Mugabe provided minimum standards were in place to allow for a relatively free election. The Ambassador stressed the importance of contesting the elections and beginning preparations now. Mutambara took the point.

¶2. (C) Mutambara said that behind the scenes SADC countries were fed up with Mugabe and told him so at the SADC Summit. He and the Ambassador agreed that South African President Mbeki's mediation could set the stage for free elections. Mutambara said ZANU-PF was behind the campaign of petrol bombings and agreed with the Ambassador that Mugabe might use it as a possible pretext to declare a state of emergency and cancel elections. Mutambara said he would be in Washington for a conference on April 19. The Ambassador proffered Department help on public outreach for Mutambara afterward.
End Summary.

One MDC Presidential Candidate

¶ 13. (C) Pro-Senate MDC faction leader Arthur Mutambara told the Ambassador April 10 that teams from both MDC factions had met and had agreed to work as a coalition, fielding one presidential candidate. That candidate would be his opposite number, Morgan Tsvangirai. Mutambara added that he had used the events of March 11 to force a degree of unity, including on elements in his faction who were opposed. As an aside, he mentioned that after a recent arrest (at the airport on his way to South Africa), police had questioned him as to why he was working with Tsvangirai. Mutambara opined that such government concern validated the coalition.

MDC Can Win

¶ 14. (C) Mutambara said he had visited rural areas the day before where he had encountered significant anti-Mugabe sentiment. People there were feeling the effects of Zimbabwe's devastated economy. The rural areas had always been Mugabe's bedrock of support. This loss of support indicated that Mugabe was taking a big risk by holding an election. It was up to the MDC to make him pay for it.

¶ 15. (C) The Ambassador responded by stressing the importance of beginning now to prepare for the 2008 elections rather than debating whether to participate, and building the strongest organization possible to contest the elections. He suggested reaching out to discontented elements within ZANU-PF, as well as reassuring the military them and their institution, noting that a neutralized army would make it more difficult to manipulate voting and vote counting. The Ambassador also discussed working with the Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network (ZESN) to establish a parallel vote counting

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system for the election.

¶ 16. (C) Mutambara took the point and agreed that the MDC had to commit to the elections and begin organizing. He said that resources were tight and inquired about USG support. The Ambassador responded that although the USG could not provide direct financing it could assist the opposition indirectly through an umbrella coalition such as "Save Zimbabwe." The organization, however, also needed to get itself organized including setting up a secretariat.

SADC and Mbeki

¶ 17. (C) Mutambara said that although the SADC leaders had not wanted to wash their "dirty laundry" in public, they were nonetheless fed up with Mugabe. According to his sources, the Dar es Salaam Summit last month had not been a victory for Mugabe. Instead, the SADC leaders had dealt Mugabe an "ugly blow." Moreover, SADC leaders were upset with Mugabe's efforts after the Summit to speak in their name and claim their support for his crack down on the opposition. The Ambassador agreed and noted that Mbeki's interview earlier in the week with the Financial Times seemed to indicate that Mugabe's mischaracterization of the Summit had increased the tension between him and the other leaders in the region.

¶ 18. (C) Mutambara said the MDC had decided to work with SADC and Mbeki. The two factions' secretary-generals, Tendai Biti and Welshman Ncube, had recently met jointly with Mbeki. By presenting a united front the MDC hoped to quell South African doubts about the MDC. The Ambassador said the key question going forward was whether Mbeki was serious about creating the minimum standards for a free election or whether he would follow his instinct of supporting the party in power, i.e. ZANU-PF. Mutambara agreed that Mbeki could play the key role in setting the stage for an internationally

assisted election that, even without a new constitution, could produce a legitimate outcome.

Government Attacks on MDC

¶19. (C) Mutambara said the recent spate of petrol bombings had been conducted by the government itself. That said, he was concerned that the MDC had been infiltrated to such an extent that ostensible MDC activists who were actually government agents could incriminate his party. Mutambara agreed with the Ambassador that Mugabe could use the pretext of MDC violence to cancel the elections and declare a state of emergency if he felt that he might lose the elections.

¶10. (C) The Ambassador added that the recent violence against the opposition seemed to be an attempt on Mugabe's part to destroy the MDC now, months before the elections, while the world's attention was once more elsewhere. It was up to the MDC to keep the international spotlight on Zimbabwe. Mutambara agreed and noted in that regard that he would be attending the Forum of Young Global Leaders sponsored by the World Economic Forum on April 19 in Washington. The Ambassador agreed to help him convince Tsvangirai or one of his deputies to accompany Mutambara and

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to facilitate official meetings as well as press opportunities during the visit.

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Comment

¶11. (C) The MDC's apparent plans to work together as a coalition in contesting the 2008 elections is at least one sign that they are starting to practice "grown-up" politics in the words of one local observer. However, we have watched them play Hamlet before on elections. It's critical that they commit now to contest the elections and start preparing immediately. They have a golden chance to win the election even if it is not fully free and fair given the state of the economy and Mugabe's unpopularity. If they fail this time, the current leadership of the opposition is unlikely to get another chance.

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